

**International Ombudsman Association
Community Engagement Plan
for the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine Action Collaborative**

The International Ombudsman Association (“IOA”) is a member-led, professional association committed to supporting organizational ombuds working in higher education worldwide. IOA intends to invite our members into the work of the Collaborative in several ways.

1. **Special Journal Issue.** Recently, the Journal of the International Ombudsman Association (“JIOA”) announced a call for papers for a special issue on *Responses of the Organizational Ombuds to Sexual Harassment*. In particular, the JIOA seeks papers that will focus on organizational ombuds’ most significant and challenging experiences in responding to and assisting with sexual harassment concerns.

At a time when social awareness of sexual harassment around the world is more heightened than ever, there are significant implications for how these cases are handled within organizations. Internal IOA surveys have documented that ombuds frequently are called upon to help with sexual harassment concerns within their organizations.

Organizational ombuds, however, are ensnared in a paradox: They need to raise awareness and accurate understanding of their work, demonstrate their value to their organizations and society, and share best practices within the profession. And yet, if ombuds were to talk openly about the matters they handle, they risk violating their own ethical principles and undermining their effectiveness. The JIOA special issue on Responses of the Organizational Ombuds to Sexual Harassment will protect privacy and anonymity of authors so that ombuds stories of assisting with sexual harassment concerns can be safely told, analyzed collectively, and used as a source of learning.

2. **Ombuds Program Toolkit.** An organizational ombuds program is a valuable resource that can help colleges and universities and all of the people in them—students, faculty, and staff—address the increasingly complex challenges associated with responding to sexual harassment. When created as an independent, confidential, impartial, and informal resource, an ombuds helps address one of the most pressing and widely recognized needs—the need for a safe and credible third party who can help with questions or concerns about an event, a policy or some other aspect of university life before a person has to decide whether or not to report the issue to one of the recognized notice channels for investigation and response. This type of guidance, and an opportunity to learn about options in a confidential setting, is valuable not only for sexual harassment issues but also a wide range of other issues that often are interrelated. And, while ombuds do not reveal confidential communications with inquirers except in narrow and urgent circumstances, they are able to provide senior leadership analyses of systemic trends and alert them to larger issues that should be addressed.

To help support and promote the critical role ombuds play in the higher education ecosystem, the IOA Board of Directors has tasked a new task force with creating a toolkit that can be used as a resource by senior administrators and others to aid the consideration and establishment of an ombuds program and to help existing ombuds be more effective. The toolkit will offer questions to guide program set up and include materials related to staffing, needed resources, and representative documents such as program charters, brochures, annual reports, and FAQs.

3. **Connect with Ombuds Programs of Member Institutions.** More than half of the Collaborative’s member institutions have an existing ombuds program that practices to the IOA Standards of Practice and Code of Ethics. IOA plans to connect with these programs and support their work in any way we can. Doing so will inform the development of the ombuds program toolkit as well as generate a better understanding of how ombuds operate in the context of a resolution process. By working with these programs, IOA seeks to identify both the promising practices that make an ombuds program effective and the challenges encountered.

4. **Internal Communication.** Working with IOA’s Communications Committee to use our internal communication tools, including a newsletter, a members only blog, occasional email blasts and website newposts, representatives will be urging people to attend, at least virtually, the event in Seattle, sharing updates and soliciting feedback about the Collaborative’s work.